



# STRATEGIC FILE

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## Russian Conservative Reawakening

Stanislav Secrieru

*Conservatism has re-emerged in Russian political discourse. It was largely employed by President Vladimir Putin to re-assert himself on the domestic stage in the volatile post-election political environment in 2011–2012 and later to legitimise asymmetrical warfare against Ukraine. However, the conservative upsurge threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia's other neighbours as well. Moreover, it represents a normative challenge for the EU, and one that requires a powerful answer based on a renewed long-term strategy towards Russia. Not the least, while helping President Putin hold onto power, the conservative turn poisons Russian society, undermines the country's economy and isolates Russia from the rest of world.*

Conservatism has once again become fashionable in Russia. President Vladimir Putin, the main trend setter, has defined “conservatism” in very ambiguous terms as a forward-looking path of development based on traditional values.<sup>1</sup> The revived conservatism in Russia is still a loosely defined ideological construction. Judging by top leadership declarations and policy actions, this conservatism has several themes. On the domestic front it develops along lines of patriotic education, economic mobilisation, social ties, Christian values and glorification of imperial history. In foreign policy, this conservatism promotes the concept of the “Russian World,” the decline of the West, defence of traditional values and historical justice. To a big extent, conservatism in Russia is still a work in progress. Nevertheless, it has emerged recently as one of the main narratives that guide Russia's domestic and foreign policy.

The debate around conservatism in Russia is crystallised around concurrent interpretations of its nature and origins. These are centred on four explanatory factors: ideas (e.g., a revamp of traditions and morality), domestic politics (e.g., power consolidation), the individual (e.g., Putin's self-perception), and external stimuli (e.g., the “colour revolutions”). These perspectives provide useful insights for understanding the conservative phenomena in Russia, but none alone is able to draw a comprehensive picture of it. The approach that treats the conservative turn as a by-product of the interaction between a complex fabric of domestic and international politics is more helpful in understanding its origins and reveals its main drivers. However, it is not enough to shed light on the mechanism of the conservative upsurge. Although it is still in the making, the empirical implications of conservatism should be addressed as well, and it is important to reflect on multiple ramifications of the conservative surge, not only for Russia itself but also for the EU and its eastern neighbours.

<sup>1</sup> V. Putin, interview to Channel One and Associated Press News Agency, 4 September 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5935>.

## Conservative Gestation

Russia's recent conservative turn in domestic and foreign policy is not absolutely new and was not totally unexpected. Since his early days in the Kremlin, Putin rejected the need for state ideology.<sup>2</sup> He consciously preserved ambiguity, combining liberal and conservative messages in his discourse and appealing to both constituencies. For some time, pragmatism replaced state ideology. Anything that best served the Kremlin's agenda was selected and introduced in ideologically mixed political vocabulary. In practice, in the early stages moderate economic liberalisation went hand in hand with power centralisation strategies. But several developments began to unravel this balance, gradually paving the way for a conservative surge.

Slowly, consolidation of the political regime and economic boom triggered by enormous oil revenues instilled in Russia more self-confidence. Simultaneously, the colour revolutions (Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004 and Kyrgyzstan 2005) made the political elites in Moscow wonder how safe Russia was from such events, exposing the other side of Russia's self-perception—insecurity. The wave of anti-government protests against monetisation of social benefits across Russia (2005) heightened threat perceptions in the Kremlin. In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin formed within the presidential administration a special bureaucratic arm, the Department for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the CIS, responsible mainly for relations with former Soviet republics. Moscow also tried to discredit chaotic pluralism in Ukraine, a task greatly facilitated from within by the new Ukrainian administration.

It was also decided that Russia needed to expand its counter-revolutionary presence in the post-Soviet world, through friendly-NGOs promoting Russia's agenda in the region. One of the results of this process was establishment in 2007 of the Russian World Fund,<sup>3</sup> which rapidly expanded its branches and activities far beyond the post-Soviet region. The Russian Orthodox Church embraced the concept of "Russia World" to formulate and legitimise Russia's special ties with post-Soviet republics. On occasion, it was also tasked to communicate the Kremlin's messages directly to post-Soviet leaders. But there was more ideological fermentation to come on the domestic level, closely linked to the preoccupation of the ruling elites, controlling large chunks of the national economy (the so called Russia Inc.), to extend the life span of the political regime.

Within ruling United Russia, debate clubs were formed and institutionalised in 2005. Two conservatively oriented platforms of debate within the party rose to prominence. They were the Centre for Social Conservative Policy, and the State Patriotic Club. Although United Russia has never been an agenda-setter, ideas developed by its conservative clubs, and in particular by the people behind these groupings, served the Kremlin well when it later switched to conservative mode. Among the founders of these clubs were Andrei Isaev who was responsible in 2013 for issues of party ideology, and Irina Yarovaya, a member of the inter-factional group of MPs for the protection of Christian values, and who was known from 2012 for her support of the bill on the protection of historical memory and several other legislative initiatives aimed to curb fundamental liberties and rights of Russian citizens.<sup>4</sup> Thus, conservative clubs provided ideological ammunition and executioners during the conservative upsurge.

The conservative current was further fine-tuned conceptually in 2006, when Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy of the Chief of Staff of the Russian presidential administration, coined the highly eclectic and ambiguous term "sovereign democracy." Widely regarded as an instrument for deflecting external meddling in domestic affairs and legitimising the democratic backslide in Russia, "sovereign democracy" called for the need to nurture a nationally-oriented elite as a counterpoint to the irresponsible and greedy oligarchy of the 90s.<sup>5</sup> The issue of a national elite invulnerable to Western pressure, and concentrating its capital primarily on Russia's development, resurfaced in 2012.

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<sup>2</sup> V. Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*, 30 December 1999, <http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian World Fund was conceived as one of Russia's soft power tools, aimed at promoting Russian culture and language and also at bringing together Russian-speaking minorities in the post-Soviet region and spreading Russia's vision around the world.

<sup>4</sup> For more see: M. Laurelle, *Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box: The New Nationalist Think-Tanks in Russia*, Stockholm Paper, October 2009, [www.risingpowersinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/Inside-and-Around-the-Kremlin.pdf](http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/Inside-and-Around-the-Kremlin.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> V. Surkov, "Suverenitet eto politicheskii sinonim konkurentnosposobnosti," *Edinaia Rossiia*, 22 February 2006, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080417005442/http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148>.

Not least, Putin's political profile has been refurbished, demonstrating a growing inclination towards the conservative theme.<sup>6</sup> This transformation was particularly visible as Putin was nearing the end of his second term in office. Several friendships and events helped to brighten his aura as conservative statesman. Putin invested time in a relationship with Nobel Prize winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, known also for his idea of Slavic unity and critical remarks on the spiritual emptiness of the West. In 2007, he awarded Solzhenitsyn the state prize for "humanitarian activity," while the latter praised Putin's political and economic achievements and lambasted the West for the way it treats a rapidly recovering Russia. Another of Putin's friends, Oscar-winning film director Nikita Mikhalkov, produced a documentary to mark the 55<sup>th</sup> birthday of the president, in which he praised him for his powerful Munich speech in 2007,<sup>7</sup> for the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad with the Moscow Patriarchate, and for his restoration of Russia's armed forces. In 2010, Mikhalkov published a "Manifesto of Illuminated Conservatism," in which he criticised liberal values, underlined the continuity of the imperial nature of the Russian state, and called for Russia's cultural and national security to be enhanced, several themes that were, in one way or another, reflected in Putin's later speeches.<sup>8</sup>

Putin and his entourage have also shown more interest in the imperial past. Father Tikhon (Shevkunov), of Sretensky monastery, allegedly Putin's "spiritual mentor," produced a documentary widely distributed on Russian TV about the downfall of the Byzantine Empire, hinting at potential lessons to be learned and advocating an autarchic perspective for Russia. In 2009, Putin's government established the Cinema Fund to finance Russian productions that would promote patriotic themes and glorify Russian history. After becoming prime minister, Putin sought to draw parallels with the Tsarist prime minister Piotr Stolypin (1906–1911), known for his ruthless approach towards the opposition, calls for political stability, and attempts to push forward a top-down economic modernisation. In 2011, Putin initiated a fundraising effort from members of government, to erect a monument dedicated to Stolypin in Moscow.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which conservative beliefs are internalised by Putin. Nonetheless, it is evident that, at a critical juncture in his political career, Putin swiftly abandoned any traces of even imitation liberalism, and implemented a conservative image that he has cultivated extensively since 2007.

## Conservative Turn: Domestic Factors

As Putin approached the end of his second term in office (2008), the question of succession became more urgent. Despite calls to run for a third term, the outgoing president decided to maintain democratic appearances and therefore let his trusted man, Dmitri Medvedev, to take temporary charge (2008–2012). In the meantime, he continued to perform a checks and balances function, as prime minister and leader of United Russia. Although, from a legal point of view, the move had not violated the Russian constitution, it was a bid to preserve the Putin system. Although Medvedev's modernisation discourse instilled hopes for gradual political liberalisation, it vanished abruptly in 2011 when Vladimir Putin declared his (formal) comeback at the helm of the country. The planned *rokirovka* (castling) between Putin and Medvedev triggered public protests in late 2011, prompting the Kremlin to react with a conservative surge, renouncing the carefully crafted ideological ambiguity of the early 2000s.

Much to the surprise of the Kremlin, the announcement of Putin's comeback was not received with enthusiasm in society. The first public sign of discontent was a martial arts event in November 2011, when Putin was booed by the crowd as he was making a short speech. However, it was the independent middle-class (fostered partially by the consumption boom), concentrated in big urban centres, that later went to the streets after the unfair parliamentary election in December 2011. Part of the Russian intelligentsia provided support for what rapidly became known as "angry citizens." Support for United Russia, despite its administrative resources and electoral fraud strategies, declined by almost 15% in comparison to previous elections.

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<sup>6</sup> The author is grateful to Marek Menkiszak for his suggestion to explore the link between the conservative surge and the evolution of Putin's political profile.

<sup>7</sup> The Munich Speech marked a sharp departure in Russia's foreign policy discourse and was gradually reflected in foreign policy and security actions. President Putin openly accused the U.S., NATO and OSCE of fuelling an arms race, threatening Russian security and meddling during elections in the internal affairs of countries, respectively. For more, see: V. Putin, speech in Munich, 10 February 2007, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912type82914type82917type84779\\_118123.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> N. Mikhalkov, "Manifest prosveshchennogo konservatizma," *Polit.ru*, 26 October 2010, [www.polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest](http://www.polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest).

The Kremlin quickly recovered after the initial shock caused by the biggest public protests since the 1990s. Putin ordered the installation of web cameras in polling stations across the country to prevent any allegations of vote stealing in the upcoming presidential election (March 2012). In parallel with faking transparency, he spurred a new wave of anti-Americanism by linking protests with financial assistance for the opposition, said to have been received from United States.<sup>9</sup> He distanced himself from United Russia and threw his weight behind the All-Russia People's Front, a loose coalition of organisations and public figures supportive of Putin's new bid for the presidency. Putin lost interest in the liberal segment of society and instead attempted to win over those who yearned for stability and had material stakes in the regime's survival. Workers were mobilised at several pro-Kremlin rallies, to present an impression of popular support and to oppose revolution and the "collapse of the country." A tank-factory worker who would later be appointed by Putin as presidential envoy to the Ural district pledged to come with fellow workers to Moscow and deal with protesters.<sup>10</sup> The Orthodox Church was brought on board to strengthen the message of stability and order provided by a national leader who, according to Patriarch Kirill, worked efficiently for his country as a "galley slave."<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the Kremlin counterpositioned the passive majority against the active, though minority, part of society.

In the aftermath of the elections, the Kremlin worked to clean up the political field and prevent unwanted political challenges in future. The growing authoritarian trend was reflected in changes of legislation on public demonstrations, NGO activities and criminalisation of calumny. The Kremlin also harassed leaders of non-parliamentary opposition, and acted to rein in independent mass-media on the internet. The systemic measures to re-assert political control went hand in hand with the conservative turn that re-enforced authoritarianism.

The conservative drive focused on morality, traditions, values and Russia's uniqueness. The leadership described Russia simultaneously as a state-civilisation and called for the rebuilding of social bonds broken during transition.<sup>12</sup> It also waged moral campaigns. The centrepiece of the "moral war" became the "Pussy Riot" case, and the rights of the LGBT community in Russia. In 2012, a Russian court sentenced members of the band "Pussy Riot," which had staged an unauthorised performance in Moscow's cathedral, to two years in prison for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred."<sup>13</sup> The Russian Church played an active role during and after the process, waging war on those who challenged traditional values and defied the Church. In sync with the Church, the Duma passed a law in 2013 banning "propaganda of not-traditional sexual relations to minors," officially stigmatising the LGBT community in Russia. It also banned adoptions by singles coming from countries where gay marriage is legal. Not least, with the intention of building a nationally oriented elite as Surkov pledged in 2006, Putin pushed through parliament and government "de-offshoring" measures aimed at repatriating Russian capital from "fiscal paradises," and at the same time severing Russian officials' financial exposure to the West.

## Conservative Turn: External Dimension

The conservative turn spilled over into foreign policy. Despite claims of a completely de-ideologised foreign policy, Russia increasingly appealed to non-material factors in international relations (traditions, values, identity, culture and civilisation). The concept of a "Russian World" that transcends the border of present-day Russia, and in which Moscow claims a special role and responsibility, has been rekindled to sustain claims on regional leadership. On the global stage, after many years saying "we are part of Europe", Russia began to portray itself as a civilisation apart, with a historical responsibility to defend and preserve traditional Christian traditions that are under attack from the "genderless and fruitless tolerance" emanating from the U.S. and the EU.<sup>14</sup> Following the trend, the Russian expert community imagined the country as a distinctive and attractive normative pole in a multi-polar system, or even as a would-be moral

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<sup>9</sup> "Putin Says U.S. Encouraging Russian Opposition," *RIA Novosti*, 8 December 2011, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20111208/169482978.html>.

<sup>10</sup> E. Barry, "Putin Reaches Down to the Assembly Line for First Appointment," *New York Times*, 18 May 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/world/europe/vladimir-putin-appoints-tank-factory-worker-who-offered-to-chase-antigovernment-protesters-off-moscow-streets.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/world/europe/vladimir-putin-appoints-tank-factory-worker-who-offered-to-chase-antigovernment-protesters-off-moscow-streets.html?_r=1&).

<sup>11</sup> "Patriarch Kirill Thanks Putin for Leading the Country out of Crisis in 1990s," *Interfax-Religion*, 8 February 2012, [www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=9049](http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=9049).

<sup>12</sup> V. Putin, "Poslanie Federalnomu Sobraniu," *Kremlin.ru*, Moscow, 12 December 2012, [www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/17118](http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/17118).

<sup>13</sup> "Pussy Riot to Appeal Sentence Next Week," *RIA Novosti*, 21 August 2012, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20120821/175348902.html>.

<sup>14</sup> V. Putin, "Poslanie Federalnomu Sobraniu," *Kremlin.ru*, Moscow, 12 December 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/19825>.

superpower.<sup>15</sup> Seen in this perspective, the conservative narratives emanating from Moscow sought to portray Russia as a “great conservative power” conceived in opposition to the West and increasingly challenging it.

Ten years later, Ukraine again served as a significant external irritant that re-enforced the conservative surge. As in 2004, protests in Kyiv against Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in the winter of 2013–2014 resurrected fears in the Kremlin of democratisation contagion. Memories of protests in Russia in 2011–2012 are still fresh. Reflecting on lessons of Maidan, Putin called for a systemic approach towards patriotic education for young people in order to prevent external powers from orchestrating similar events in Russia using social media.<sup>16</sup> The perception that the West helped Maidan to eject Russia from the post-Soviet region also contributed to the Kremlin’s highly destructive strategy against Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea in March was justified by a narrative of historical justice (“taking what was ours,” “taking for what blood was spilled by Russia”), while further destabilisation in eastern Ukraine was portrayed as a re-composition of *Novorossiya*, a historical term used to describe some possessions of the Tsarist empire around the Black Sea. In this context, Russian state media outlets massively popularised Solzhenitsyn’s prediction of the inevitable division of the Ukrainian state if it split from the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup>

As the U.S. and the EU applied rounds of sanctions against Russia, Moscow sought to widen normative divergence with the West and showed a taste for backward economic self-sufficiency in sync with the conservative surge. The initiatives considered by the government varied from reviving plans for the introduction of an annual cap on imported movies and a strategy on “state cultural policy” (dubbed as “We are not Europe”),<sup>18</sup> to plans to develop a national card payment system and suggestions for Russian businessmen to withdraw their companies from foreign stock markets and re-list them on the Moscow stock exchange. Among these initiatives, one, a ban on profanity in theatres and movies, on TV and in the mass media, was particularly comical. On a more serious note, the government tabled initiatives on limiting the import of foreign equipment, in parallel with measures to provide substitutes. By the same logic, Yuri Kovalchuk, the owner of *Rossyia Bank*, who was blacklisted by the United States, made a rare public appearance on TV to call on business people to decide where their true homes lay, and explained the crisis in Ukraine as the result of a failure to form “nationally oriented business.”<sup>19</sup> Given the Kremlin’s attitudes towards the role of business people, their choice seems to be pre-determined.

## Ramifications of the Conservative Surge

While the conservative trend has gathered rapid pace in 2014, it is difficult to anticipate whether it will be strengthened or curtailed in the mid-term. The introduction of an annual cap on foreign movie productions was postponed for one year, while conditions for a national payment system were relaxed in order to allow foreign companies (MasterCard and Visa) to operate in the Russian market. Should these be interpreted as signs that conservatism is receding and a more pragmatic approach is being tested? On the other hand, Moscow authorities pledged to build in the city and surrounding areas up to 380 new churches (rather than the earlier figure of 200), while Russian MPs mulled the reintroduction of “political information” (*politinformatsia*) in schools, a practice abandoned after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The search for an answer is complicated by the difficulty in predicting how far one of the engines of the conservative surge—Putin himself—is ready to go in domestic and foreign politics.<sup>20</sup> He has, until recently, shown a penchant for using conservative messages to advance his agenda, and there are no clear signs that he intends to back down from this course. In fact, judging by the intensity of domestic information manipulation and military involvement in Ukraine, Putin’s commitment to this route went up not down. Amid high volatility in the

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<sup>15</sup> See: “Ideologija konservatizma mozhet stat faktorom ‘myagkoi sily,’” *RIA Novosti*, 12 December 2013, <http://ria.ru/politics/20131212/983766222.html#ixzz2nj6zpsmz>; N. Zlobin, “Eshche raz pro poslanie Putina,” *Ekho Moskvy Blog*, 16 December 2013, [www.echo.msk.ru/blog/nzlobin/1219425-echo](http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/nzlobin/1219425-echo).

<sup>16</sup> V. Putin, „Zasedanie Soveta po mezhnatsionalnym otnosheniam,” Moscow, 3 July 2014, [www.kremlin.ru/news/46144](http://www.kremlin.ru/news/46144).

<sup>17</sup> “Solzhenitsyn’s Foresight on Ukraine Proves Eerily Prescient,” *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 21 May 2014, [http://rbth.co.uk/arts/2014/05/20/solzhenitsyns\\_foresight\\_on\\_ukraine\\_proves\\_eerily\\_prescient\\_36791.html](http://rbth.co.uk/arts/2014/05/20/solzhenitsyns_foresight_on_ukraine_proves_eerily_prescient_36791.html).

<sup>18</sup> “Minkultury izlozhilo ‘Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kulturnoi politiki,’” *Izvestia*, 10 April 2014, <http://izvestia.ru/news/569016#ixzz2yetpYSUN>.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Yuri Kovalchuk, *Vesti Nedeli*, 23 March 2014, <http://vesti7.ru/news?id=42475>.

<sup>20</sup> For more see: A. Sergunin, “Has Putin the Pragmatist Turned into Putin the Ideologue?,” *Russia Direct*, 14 April 2014, [www.russia-direct.org/content/has-putin-pragmatist-turned-putin-ideologue?utm\\_source=newsletter\\_RD\\_3\\_2\\_2014&utm\\_medium=news&utm\\_campaign=RD](http://www.russia-direct.org/content/has-putin-pragmatist-turned-putin-ideologue?utm_source=newsletter_RD_3_2_2014&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=RD).

region and a new stage of authoritarian consolidation in Russia, a number of provisional conclusions concerning the ramifications of the conservative turn can be still drawn.

### *Russia—Heading to Dead End Again*

Putin's position in the political system after his comeback and the public protests throughout 2011–2012 appeared to be weaker than in 2008. But, as a result of a conservative rally among society, he reasserted control over social segments that yearn for stability. At a later stage, as a “collector of Russian lands” he even won sympathy of at least part of the middle class, who had been strongly against him two years earlier. As one Russian expert aptly observed: “by annexing Crimea, Putin gave to the majority of Russians a sense of a new victory of which to be proud.”<sup>21</sup> As nothing better cements identity than success, Putin used the annexation of Crimea to breed a conservative version of identity in Russia. It is in this light that Putin's highest approval rating in the past two to three years (71% in March 2014), and the overwhelming support for the annexation of Crimea (88% in March 2014), should be seen.<sup>22</sup> Putin re-created, even if temporarily, the comfortable landslide majority that he used as a tool to govern until 2008. Thus he should feel more confident now in relations with the political and economic elites, and with military top brass.

One may argue that such a position strengthens Putin's free hand in domestic and foreign politics. Judging by the multiplication of political and economic initiatives to expand and solidify the Kremlin's grip on politics, society and the economy, Putin aims to make full use of the momentum as he did after bloodbath in Beslan in 2004.<sup>23</sup> However, as the cumulative costs of the conservative surge (U.S. and EU sanctions, and Russia's self-isolating actions) will put Russian economy under stress,<sup>24</sup> the population will start to feel the pain sooner rather than later, thus endangering Putin's new majority. Anticipating public discontent alimented by economic decline, the authorities began an early “scapegoat” campaign, suggesting the external origins of the slowdown in Russia's economic growth.<sup>25</sup> However, scapegoating alone will not be enough to manage social dissatisfaction in the mid and long run.

The Kremlin is likely to rely more on shallow messianism as well. Therefore, the post-Soviet Russian diplomatic position, that foreign policy has to contribute to the country's economic development, has been shelved for good. Moscow is already reviving the messianic traditions of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, which in early 90s were considered harmful and leading to a dead end. The Kremlin's messianic theme is evolving in two directions. The first increasingly accentuates alienation between the “decadent” West and Russia, as the latter allegedly not only favours inter-confessional dialogue, but also upholds traditional Christian values. The Kremlin also began to throw more weight behind the idea of the “besieged fortress,” and to use arguments about Russia's “special path” (*osobyi put*) of development, which often is synonymous with isolation and authoritarianism. There is a fertile ground for such normative appeal. In opinion polls, 46% of respondents were in favour of the special path, while 22% wanted Russia to embark once again on a Soviet trajectory of development.<sup>26</sup> The second direction of messianic discourse has a regional aspect, the “salvation of persecuted” Russian speakers across post-Soviet space, and the re-creation of the “Russian world,” are the main themes. Accordingly, the reconstruction of the “Russian world” requires sacrifices for the well-being of all Russians. Despite the initial failure to spread the *Novorossiia* concept in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin is unlikely to ditch it easily. Whether Russian citizens will accept the price of the “Russian world,” and the debilitating effects of economic and even moderate isolation, remains to be seen.

In an attempt to prevent popular discontent, justification of the “Russian world” project will also benefit from pragmatic rationales, unveiling in classic imperial terms how much Russia will gain from reclaiming

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<sup>21</sup> Russian expert's remarks, Berlin, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> See: V. Putin: “Otnoshenie i doverie,” *Levada-Tsentr*, 16 April 2014, [www.levada.ru/16-04-2014/vladimir-putin-otnoshenie-i-doverie](http://www.levada.ru/16-04-2014/vladimir-putin-otnoshenie-i-doverie); “Proiskhodiashchee v Ukraine, Krymu i reaktsiia Rossii,” *Levada-Tsentr*, 26 March 2014, [www.levada.ru/26-03-2014/proiskhodiashchee-v-ukraine-krymu-i-reaktsiya-rossii](http://www.levada.ru/26-03-2014/proiskhodiashchee-v-ukraine-krymu-i-reaktsiya-rossii).

<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of the Beslan hostage crisis, Putin announced a package of reforms that, among other things, cancelled direct elections of provincial governors.

<sup>24</sup> For more analysis of the Russian economy's weaknesses, see: M. Rostowska, “Russia's Hidden Underbelly of Debt,” *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 11 (94), July 2014.

<sup>25</sup> “Medvedev: Slozhnosti v ekonomike Rossii pytaiutsia sozdat' iskusstvenno,” *RIA Novosti*, 15 April 2014, <http://ria.ru/economy/20140415/1003979556.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “Osobyi rossiiskii put’,” *Levada-Tsentr*, 7 April 2014, [www.levada.ru/07-04-2014/osobyi-rossiiskii-put](http://www.levada.ru/07-04-2014/osobyi-rossiiskii-put).

former Soviet lands. The stream of explanations about Crimea's extraordinary military and economic value for Russia could easily be replicated in case of invasion of eastern Ukraine (for example, the benefits to the defence industry, and access to natural resources).<sup>27</sup> In parallel, authorities are likely to spread the message that Russia is so big and important for Europe that it cannot be isolated, and that economic sanctions will help Russian domestic industry to develop. Thus, while being used as a salve to social dissatisfaction at home, Russia's new, old messianism, coupled with utilitarian motivations, will provide cover for the Kremlin's more combative policy in the post-Soviet area. However, much stronger economic sanctions by the West, with deep repercussions for the Russian economy, could shatter the foundations of this rediscovered messianism and increase turbulence in Russian domestic politics. Unsurprisingly, despite Russian officials rallying around the president with bravado, the Kremlin is busy attempting to prevent further sanctions, to minimise their effects, or to get them cancelled.

The conservative path upon which the Kremlin embarked shows two major weaknesses in the long term. First, while Russia has greatly improved its tactical skills in conducting military operations, information warfare and domestic public opinion manipulation, it has shown its poor capacity to learn lessons from strategic blunders that triggered systemic crisis followed by the collapse of the state in 1917 and 1991. Although historical events rarely occur in the same way, the general Russian approach to Crimea and to Ukraine planted potential seeds of multiple domestic crises in the mid and long term (concerning federalism, the economy, and relations with major powers), and these might seriously test the vitality of the Russian state. Russia's greater exposure to the international economy, and its one-sided economic model built over the past two decades, will increase the price of the "special path" that the Kremlin is trying to pursue. The self-inflicted nature of the problems Russia is to face also reconfirms its inability to escape from outdated recipes for a grand strategy that trapped it in a dead end several times before.

Secondly, after an impressive impulse for emancipation and an effort to prioritise individual liberties above the state's interests in the 90s, Russian society ultimately failed to put in place defence mechanisms that could prevent the country from sliding back to authoritarianism or accepting so easily the resurrection of expansionist habits. Although Russian citizens staged anti-war protests in Moscow and Saint Petersburg between March and May, it was too late and not enough to have an impact.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Kremlin created fake public protests and put in place its own demonstration in support of the presidential position on Ukraine. Many participants who attended pro-governmental rallies were softly coerced to do so (as their salaries are paid by state institutions), and this very fact re-confirms the failure of Russian society to reverse the traditionally patrimonial rapport between the Russian state and its citizens. This in turn is partially responsible for Russia's failure to redefine its role and correct the strategy that previously led to the dissolution of the state.

### *Russia's Neighbours—Learning from Others' Mistakes*

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, post-Soviet states covered by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, do not represent a uniform region. They live in different regional environments (for example, Armenia and Moldova), they often pursue different foreign policy goals (Georgia and Azerbaijan), and they build different political systems (Belarus and Moldova). For some leaders in the neighbourhood, the conservative turn in Russia could also be an opportunity to tighten screws domestically by reproducing Kremlin's practices. For others, it might prove be a useful lesson to avoid similar mistakes and address popular concerns preventing discontent from spilling over into the streets. Despite this variety, some common challenges emanating from the conservative surge in Russia can be identified.

The concept of the "Russian world" raises the issue of the inviolability of borders in the eastern neighbourhood, especially in states that host Russian-speaking minorities. Arguments that the Kremlin has no resources for grabbing more lands ignore the fact that, facing economic decline, the regime will increasingly look for external enemies to shore up domestic support. In such a context, reckless decisions to invade neighbours using the cover of unidentified "green men," thus delivering another victory, cannot be totally ruled out. Thus, while Ukraine is the primary target for Russian "centuries-old lands" claims,

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<sup>27</sup> See: "Eksperty podschitali vygody ot prisoedinenia Kryma k Rossii," *MIR24*, 21 March 2014, <http://mir24.tv/news/economy/10108163>.

<sup>28</sup> For more on protest potential in Russia, see: L. Datskova, A.M. Dyer, M. Rostowska, "After Ukraine, Are Russia and Belarus Ripe for Revolution?," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 8 (44), May 2014.

Moldova, Kazakhstan, Belarus or even EU member States (such as the Baltic States) are not immune to these risks. However, the “Russian world” transcends territories populated by ethnic Russians and looks at national minorities that are often Russian-oriented and/or have in the past demanded more autonomy. Thus, of the use of Gagauz and Bulgars in Moldova, Armenians in Georgia, or Lezghin in Azerbaijan, is also on the cards should the opportunity arise for Moscow. Therefore, low scale military operations aimed at fuelling separatism should be given serious consideration by EaP states. Particular attention should be paid to marginalised pro-Russian groups that often act below the radar or are just dormant, but could be activated when the Kremlin deems the moment to be right. Such threats require, besides investment in counter-intelligence and small elite units ready to repel disguised limited military penetration, a sensible and coherent policy to involve national minorities widely in political and economic processes, and to promote economic development and education in areas populated by them.

However, weak states and authoritarian regimes are poorly suited for the development and implementation of such policy towards minorities. They tend to concentrate power instead of sharing it. They are predisposed to suck out the state’s resources for private gain instead of investing in public projects. Not least, they prefer to buy the loyalty of local leaders, who are often ready to sell it to the highest bidder, even a foreign one. Ukraine recently showed how these weaknesses can be manipulated efficiently by an external player. Therefore, when the Kremlin is set to manipulate the weaknesses of neighbours, and even to turn them in “failed states,” inclusive political regimes, anti-corruption measures, and strong institutions in EaP states are not only about prosperity and good governance, but also about territorial integrity and overall national security.

Two important tools for the propagation of conservative messages are the Russian Church and Russian mass media, both quite influential in several EaP states. They help to compete with local governments over the definition of identity. While local authorities promote national identity, Russia strives to encapsulate communities in a wider identity (the “Russian World”) tightly linked to Russia. They also serve as powerful transmission belts in EaP states, and to some extent they shape public opinion. They contribute to the formation and preservation of a Russia-centric picture of the outside world and offer Moscow’s view on internal developments in EaP states. For instance, in Moldova, where TV is the most popular and trusted source of information, Prime TV, which retransmits the Russian channel ORT, is the most frequently watched channel. Thus, despite Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, 50% of respondents in Moldova consider that “reunification” of Crimea with Russia was a result of freely expressed will.<sup>29</sup>

Moscow’s ability to influence public opinion helps it to undermine support for local governments, polarise society, foment or amplify intolerance, and advance the Russian agenda in EaP states. Not surprisingly, pro-Russian militias seizing some administrative buildings in eastern Ukraine, also targeted TV transmission infrastructure to bring on air previously suspended Russian channels (this happened, for example, in Luhansk and Donetsk). Against a background of Russia beefing up and attuning its propaganda tools to legitimise abuse of power against its neighbours, EaP states have to monitor media carefully and take timely measures to halt the spread of Kremlin’s messages via TV.

Last but not least, Russia’s reassertion in the neighbourhood leaves less space for manoeuvre or for game-playing between Russia and other regional players. Previously, the fine balance between Russia and the EU helped EaP states to solidify their negotiating positions and gain resources from both sides. Moscow more openly demonstrated that it is reluctant to play such games, and, where it can, will apply the concept of limited sovereignty. As one diplomat from an EU Member State pointed out: “Russia thinks that EaP states have to prove that they deserve sovereignty. If they are not capable of holding on to it, they will be stripped off of it with the active involvement of Moscow.”<sup>30</sup> While Azerbaijan is almost financially independent, and will still be able to strike a balance between regional players, Armenia’s room for manoeuvre has been reduced drastically as it has been coerced towards the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The ability of Belarus to navigate between Russia and the EU will be tested in the coming years, as the Eurasian Economic Union takes shape. As the example of Ukraine demonstrates, the multi-dimensional game in which Russia is involved can help to keep the state alive in intensive care, but in a moment of crisis could pose an existential threat to it.

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<sup>29</sup> See: Barometrul Opiniei Publice, “Institutul pentru Politici Publice,” April 2014, [www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=en&idc=156&id=681&parent=0](http://www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=en&idc=156&id=681&parent=0); Barometrul Opiniei Publice, “Institutul pentru Politici Publice,” April 2014, [www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=681&parent=0](http://www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=681&parent=0).

<sup>30</sup> Remarks by a diplomat from an EU Member State, Berlin 2014.

## Conclusions and Recommendations for the EU

The ramifications of Russia's conservative surge challenges the EU's approach towards Russia but also towards its eastern neighbours. Thus, the EU is at a critical juncture, which requires a fundamental re-assessment of its policy regarding Russia and the neighbourhood. Several factors speak for a major policy overhaul.

The premise that greater economic interdependence and emerging business constituencies with strong interests in ties with Europe will induce a more cooperative attitude on the part of Russia has proved false. Russia perceived interdependence as a lever rather than a constraint for its policy. Even in the face of damage to its reputation and economy, Russia has relied extensively on energy to gain leverage over EU Member States. Regarding private business groups in Russia, their behaviour and preferences are amenable to Moscow's will due to insecure property rights that are guaranteed only through loyalty to the Kremlin. As one Russian oligarch summarised in describing his relationship with the country's leadership: "if the state says we need to give it up [the company], we will give it up."<sup>31</sup> Thus, business cannot play an autonomous role in shaping Russia's policy towards the EU.

Contrary to expectations of the pacifying effect of commercial interests, Russia's economic recovery through the 2000s, fuelled partially by growing trade with the EU, encouraged it to reassert itself in the post-Soviet space and ultimately to threaten the security architecture in Europe. Instead of focusing on qualitative development, the Kremlin re-directed more available resources towards security-related fields. In part, such investments made sense. More funding was a welcome development after a decade during which the army had been left in disarray, and strapped of the cash it needed to train and modernise. However, as military operations in Georgia and Ukraine have shown, money was not spent only on improving the oversight of Russian borders, but also on pursuing both conventional and non-linear military operations, which resulted in violations of its neighbours' borders.

The EU's often Russia-first approach has also convinced Moscow that it can play the divide and rule game with EU Member States and escape unpunished for abuses of power in the neighbourhood. From the point of view of the Kremlin, normality returned soon after the war in Georgia in 2008, while the EU's review of its relations with Russia resulted in a short assessment document and "Partnership for Modernisation," which had little impact. As one EU official confessed "there is no strategic debate in the EU on a long-term strategy towards Russia."<sup>32</sup> Left unanswered, the challenges emanating from Russia "invited" Moscow to put more heat on its neighbours and the European order in general.

To some degree, the EaP was a reaction to Russia's aggressive tactics in the post-Soviet region. Still, the EaP is designed mainly to produce effects in the long run through transforming societies during peace time. Its often technocratic and slow approach does not produce the expected results in a highly competitive and hostile regional environment. While the EU invests to help neighbours become more functional and better governed states, Russia employs a variety of instruments, including the military, to undermine its neighbours' sovereignty. It takes more time and resources to build something functional than it does to destabilise a state, as Russia demonstrates through its actions in Ukraine. For this simple reason, Russia often has the upper hand in post-Soviet states that are still projects under construction. However, over-reliance on the stick rather than the carrot gradually reduces the effectiveness of Russia's levers on its neighbours, and makes EU even more attractive for them.

Given the grave security threats that some EaP states might or already do face, the EU's should revisit and implement its eastern neighbourhood policy faster, and should acquire a strong security component by helping to re-form and strengthen the spine of states, including the justice systems, anti-corruption institutions, interior ministries and intelligence. The EU was recently forced to adjust the speed of decision-making due to Russia's threats against neighbours (for example, the deadline for the preparation of the Association Agreement with Moldova was brought forward, as was the introduction of ATP for Ukraine until DCFTA comes into force). Further improvement to streamline decision-making in the aftermath of Russia's economic and political destabilisation tactics is needed. This is particularly important in the context of AA implementation in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, and of Russia's measures to undercut economic

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in C. Belton, "I Don't Need to Defend Myself," *Financial Times*, 13 July 2007, [www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/470bc928-30da-11dc-9a81-0000779fd2ac.html?siteedition=intl#axzz38fxoQgtj](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/470bc928-30da-11dc-9a81-0000779fd2ac.html?siteedition=intl#axzz38fxoQgtj).

<sup>32</sup> EU official's remarks, Brussels, 2014.

growth and promote social disobedience in these states. The EU should be ready to allocate emergency (compensatory) funds more quickly, and to deploy or expand ESDP missions at speed, in order to stabilise the situation and provide an international presence on the ground.

The conservative surge in Russia implies normative competition with the EU, but this is not confined to the post-Soviet region. While the EU is focused on implementing projects and monitoring reforms, Russia relies on information warfare to discredit the EU and local pro-European forces, and to gather support for Eurasian integration. Authoritarian practices and intolerance are exported to the neighbourhood too, even if they are not always successful. In the short run, and on the rhetorical level, the EU should actively neutralise the Russian narrative that the EaP is the origin of the crisis in Ukraine, a view to some extent shared by representatives of EU Member States. The EU should highlight that Russia's zero sum approach and inability to accept Ukraine's sovereign choice are responsible for the current crisis. In the mid and long term, the EU's neighbourhood policy should get more information coverage in EaP states.

In sync with the conservative trend, Russia challenges the EU's values inside Europe by building alliances with political parties that embrace intolerance and xenophobia (Ataka in Bulgaria, Jobbik in Hungary, and the National Front in France). While not being a primary force behind these movements, Russia works to amplify their rise across Europe and to influence political processes, in particular where these parties are indispensable for the ruling majority to remain in power, or where they enjoy huge support in society.<sup>33</sup> Several far-right parties argued against sanctions on Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, while their representatives attended the "referendum" in Crimea to give legitimacy to Russia's occupation. The Kremlin's flirtation with the far right also helps to undermine the European project, and at the same time to recruit useful voices inside European institutions. For instance, good scores of the far right parties in European Parliament elections give Russia the opportunity to create spoilers within the European legislative body. In parallel, the Kremlin's message of retaining absolute sovereignty and the defence of ethnic Russians' rights is in tune with the far right message of a return to sovereignty and nationalisation in European politics.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Russia's conservative appeal seduces not only the far right, but also leaders of the centre right mainstream (for example, Hungarian prime minister Orbán's adherence to the idea of illiberal democracy). Thus, the Kremlin's conservatism challenges the EU's values and the political systems of EU Member States, by contributing to the declining influence of traditional political parties, or to the dangerous transformation of well-established parties. The introduction of EU tools to safeguard democracy in Member States, becomes very relevant in this context.

Russia's support for illiberal forces across Europe, and military threats to EaP states, require a bold answer that goes beyond the initial reaction to the annexation of Crimea and Russian-inspired insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Accumulated challenges, left unaddressed, undermine the foundations of the European order, which offers predictability and rules out military solutions in relations between states. Russian conservatism in foreign policy does not aim to conserve the current order, but through repetitive exceptions from this order it aims to destroy it gradually. The Russian vision is conservative in a sense that it seeks restoration of a 19<sup>th</sup> century European order, based on great powers with more or less clearly defined spheres of influence. The EU will need to present a united front regarding Russia, if it is to defend the European order. However, unity for the sake of unity will count for little. Such unity should find expression in a strategic response, upheld by broad consensus. Certainly, this might imply measures that will come at a cost for the EU. However, failure to uphold, in a timely manner, the values that serve as pillars of the European society of states (for example, the right to choose alliances freely; tolerance; free elections) will certainly increase the price of defending them later, when the regional setting becomes even more volatile.

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<sup>33</sup> For more see: *The Russian Connection: The Spread of pro-Russian Policies on the European Far Right*, Political Capital Institute, 14 March 2014, [www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc\\_flash\\_report\\_russian\\_connection.pdf](http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> See: A. Shekhovtsov, "The Kremlin's Marriage of Convenience with the European Far Right," *Open Democracy*, 28 April 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/kremlin%E2%80%99s-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right>.